



Dick Turpin: The Myth of the English Highwayman

By James Sharpe

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As Dick Turpin went to the scaffold in York in 1739 he was determined to look his best. The previous day he had had a new frock coat and pumps delivered to him in the condemned man's cell in York Castle Prison. And he paid GBP3 and 10 shillings for five men to act as mourners. Who was this notorious highwayman and why did he become so famous? What did he do to become the subject of such extraordinary myths? Most of all, why are highwaymen romantic figures? We have highwayman now: we call them muggers and car-jackers and we don't sing ballads about them or eulogise them for their brave exploits. This is a masterly biography of one of Britain's best-known criminals - but it is also an examination of the cult of the highwayman, of crime in the 18th century and the treatment of criminals. In the absence of any police force how were crimes solved? Who did the detective work? And did the criminals get a fair trial - an important question if you were going to hang from the neck for a relatively minor misdemeanour. Was there a criminal underclass and did people really live in terror of going on the roads at night. Looking at the underbelly of society and the nastier aspects of life that many historians ignore, James Sharpe creates a vivid picture of life on the edges in 18th century Britain.

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Editorial Review

Review

A highly readable biography of Dick Turpin, the infamous eighteenth-century highwayman who became the subject of extraordinary legends that over the years have raised him to the status of folk hero. Professor James Sharpe shows that the historical truth about Turpin (who was hanged in York in 1739), and highwaymen, is far more brutal and bloody as he examines the cult and eighteenth-century crime in general. Was there a criminal underclass and were people genuinely afraid to venture out at night? Sharpe also explains how crimes were solved in the absence of a police force and whether criminals were given fair trials - and through a vivid narrative, he offers a colourful picture of life at the edges during those turbulent times.

About the Author

James Sharpe is Professor of History at York University and is the author of *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter* (Profile) as well as several books on crime and punishment.

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